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O. HENRY

Only four years have passed since the death of O. Henry, the most popular American short-story writer since Bret Harte, and these four years have been marked by a great increase in the number of people who are reading and discussing his stories. The first edition of O. Henry's complete works was sold at the astonishing price of one hundred and twenty-five dollars, but within the last year other editions have been issued at a very much cheaper rate, and are selling rapidly. As so many people are interested in O. Henry, it is surprising that so little has been written of him, and that his name is omitted from such important Southern reference books as *The South in the Building of the Nation* and *The Library of Southern Literature*. It should be interesting to learn something of the man as well as of his art in writing the technical short story.

I.

William Sidney Porter,—or O. Henry, as he is familiarly known,—was born in Greensboro, North Carolina, September 11, 1862. He came of old Carolina stock. His great uncle, Jonathan Worth, was a governor of North Carolina; his mother, Mary Jane Virginia Swaim, had decided literary ability and occasionally wrote poems, a few of which are said to have appeared in her father's paper, *The Greensboro Patriot*; his father, Algernon Sidney Porter, was a skilful physician and an inventor of some distinction. Will Porter was the third of four sons.

Three years after Will's birth, his mother died, leaving her children and her household to be cared for by the capable hands of his aunt, Miss Evelena Porter. In addition to her household duties Miss Porter conducted a school, and under her supervision Will received his education. Happily he learned more of the art of story-telling than of the ordinary common school branches; for the story hour, in which both teacher and pupils took part, held a prominent place in Miss Porter's curriculum. Will's story always surpassed those told by his classmates. As a result

of his aunt's teaching, he became interested in reading, and many years later declared: "I did more reading between my thirteenth and nineteenth years than I have done in all the years that have passed since then. And my taste at that time was much better than it is to-day; for I used to read nothing but the classics. Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* and Lane's translations of *The Arabian Nights* were my favorites." Miss Evelena Porter, more than any other, seems to have had the chief part in developing O. Henry's mind.

The boy's school-days were terminated when he was only sixteen, and he became prescription clerk in the drugstore of his uncle, Clark Porter. He made good, as two testimonials written May 26, 1884, show. The one, signed by Drs. Beall and Hall, and others, says: "His character here was above reproach, and as a druggist we invariably found him careful, painstaking, and accurate." The other, signed by J. N. Nelson, Wm. U. Steiner, register of deeds, and J. D. White, postmaster, declared that "he is undoubtedly a young man of good moral character and reputed to be a No. one druggist and a very popular young man among his many friends."¹ Drug-mixing occupied only a part of the time. In leisure moments Will Porter was trying his wings, and the result of those trials was a play, which is not extant, but which was warmly received and warmly praised by his friends. Curiously enough, he showed a greater aptitude for drawing than for writing. A favorite diversion of his was to sketch the face of a customer at the top of a charge bill and to let his uncle guess the name from the likeness. Porter was not physically strong, however, and his father feared that the confinement was injuring his health.

Accordingly, in 1881, when Dr. and Mrs. J. K. Hall set out for Texas to visit their sons, Richard and Lee, Will Porter, then eighteen years old, accompanied them. The Halls, who are well known in the annals of the Texas Rangers, owned a sheep-ranch in La Salle County, and here Porter remained nearly three years. His experiences, which were later incorporated into *Heart of the West*, enabled him to describe with confidence,

¹ See *Rolling Stones*, p. 112.

understanding, and accuracy various phases of Western life. He was also learning other things. Spending much of his time in reading Webster's *Dictionary*, he acquired a vocabulary whose breadth and vigor are surprising. The few books that came his way were eagerly devoured; and he wrote a few stories which Mrs. Hall praised highly (comparing them indeed to Rider Haggard's), but these he always destroyed before beginning a new one. Interest in drawing remained with him, and while his numerous pictures show no knowledge of technique, they do show much native ability.

His fame as an illustrator reached the ears of Mr. John Maddox of Austin. Mr. Maddox was urging his old companion, Joe Dixon, to relinquish his mining schemes, which had been unsuccessful, and to write up his experiences for publication in book form. He agreed to assume the responsibility for publishing the book, and mentioned the fact that Will Porter, a young boy on a nearby ranch, would illustrate it. Much against his judgment, Dixon came to Austin, and the manuscript of *Carbonate Days*, as the novel was to be called, was soon under way. Porter prepared forty illustrations; but Dixon soon lost confidence in his ability to write the book. Fearing that his novel was worthless and that Mr. Maddox would lose money on it, he dropped the sheets of *Carbonate Day* into the Colorado River at the point where Austin's magnificent bridge now stands, and set out for the Rockies. The pictures, however, were preserved, and the majority of them were given by Porter to the late Mrs. John Hagelstein of San Angelo.

This occurred in 1883. Shortly afterward, Porter moved to Austin, where for four years he resided with the family of Mr. Joe Harrell. They remember vividly his mastery of words,—his remarkable ability to spell and define. One of his Austin associates remarks in this connection: "Mr. Porter was very careful in the use and selection of language. He rarely used slang, and his style in ordinary conversation was very much purer and more perfect than it is in his writings."² Porter's first position was that of clerk in the real estate firm of Maddox Brothers

² Page, *The Bookman*, July, 1913.

and Anderson. From 1886 to 1890 he served as compiling draftsman in the State Land Office, his impressions of which are given in a burlesque called "Bexar Script No. 2692" that appeared in *The Rolling Stone*.

In 1890 Porter left the Land Office and became paying and receiving teller in the old First National Bank of Austin. As it happened, W. C. Brann, editor of *The Iconoclast*, moved to Waco at this time, selling his paper to Porter for \$250. Only two numbers of *The Iconoclast* had appeared under Porter's editorship when Brann asked for the name again. Porter consented without demur, and the first number of his rechristened paper, *The Rolling Stone*, was published in Austin, April 28, 1894. It purposed, in true O. Henry vein, "to fill a long-felt want that does not appear, by the way, to be altogether insatiable at present." *The Rolling Stone* had a brief but brilliant life during 1894-1895. Porter was assisted in editing it by "Dixie" Daniels, —now Dr. D. Daniels, a prominent dentist who is practising in Galveston. The paper's subtitle, "Out for the Moss," was a misnomer: "moss" came in slowly, and what little was collected, this happy-go-lucky couple spent each night.

The Rolling Stone was a weekly which contained current events treated in humorous fashion, short stories, imaginary interviews with prominent men, burlesques, cartoons, and verse. Porter wrote nearly all of the copy and drew the cartoons, while Daniels assisted him with the type-setting and proof-reading. A feature of the paper was a page gotten up in imitation of a backwoods country paper and called "The Plunkville Patriot." "The Patriot" claimed to be published by Colonel Aristotle Jordan, editor and ex-candidate for county judge. It depends for its humor primarily on a system of alarming typographical errors and transposition of copy. Only in one instance is there an apology for errors: "Our capital \$'s were stolen by some local burglar, and we use \$ marks." The office of the "Patriot" is changed each week in order to avoid paying the rent, and when some firm like Adams and Company orders its \$2.25 ad. discontinued, the "Patriot" retorts: "No less than three children have been poisoned by eating their canned vegetables, and J. O. Adams, the senior member of the firm, was

run out of Kansas City for adulterating codfish balls. It pays to advertise." Through its news columns the public is edified to hear that "There is a dangerous hole in the front steps of the Élite saloon," or that Mark Twain and Charles Egbert Craddock are spending the summer together in the Adirondacks.

"The Plunkville Patriot" is not especially amusing, but the stories which satirize the customs and institutions and people of Austin, the burlesques on "The Prisoner of Zenda" and "Lecocq, the Great French Detective," the interviews with President Cleveland, Governor Hogg, and others are extremely funny. They represent the true O. Henry, both in method and in manner, as well as do his last productions. And although *The Rolling Stone* had an almost purely local appeal, yet if it had flourished, it should rival *Life* and *Judge* to-day. Letters praising the paper were received from such celebrities as Bill Nye and John Kendrick Bangs; but Porter foolishly entered into political quarrels with the Callahan administration of San Antonio, and the circulation of the paper, which had never been large, became almost nil. At the same time he became involved in trouble at the bank, and *The Rolling Stone* was discontinued.

The next six years of Porter's life must be passed over quickly. *The Rolling Stone* made its last appearance in April, 1895. In October Porter and his family moved to Houston, where he secured a position as reporter on the *Post* at a salary of fifteen dollars a week. For about five months he wrote daily a column of "Postscripts" that were so widely read and so widely praised that his salary was soon increased to twenty and then to twenty-five dollars a week. The editor of the *Post*, Mr. R. M. Johnston, spoke very kindly to the young man and advised him to go to New York, where his talents would be in demand by the big newspapers.

Porter went instead to New Orleans, while his wife returned to her mother's home in Austin, a prey to tuberculosis. In New Orleans he worked at various odd jobs. It was at this time that the idea of submitting stories to magazines came to him, and he set about choosing a *nom de plume* in a characteristically haphazard manner. In the description of a fashionable ball he saw

and appropriated the name "Henry," and the initial "O" was selected because it is the easiest letter to make. Later, it might be added, a report that "O" stood for "Olivier" gained credence, and several of his stories appeared in magazines under the name, "Olivier Henry." His stay in New Orleans was a brief one. He soon went to Central America and there spent a few months "knocking around among the refugees and consuls," picking up ideas, and acquiring material that was later to enable him to write *Cabbages and Kings*.

In February, 1897, Porter returned to Austin and found his wife seriously ill. Until her death on July 27, he devoted himself to nursing her. From March, 1898, to July, 1901, Porter was under a cloud. During this time he wrote to his little daughter, Margaret, pretending that he was a drummer, and sending his letters to various post-offices from which they were mailed direct to her. This serves to explain a letter dated Toledo, Ohio, October 1, 1900, in which he wrote: "I am learning to play the mandolin, and we must get you a guitar, and we will learn a lot of duets together when I come home, which will certainly not be later than next summer, and maybe earlier." And again a letter dated May 19, 1901: "Here it is summertime, and the bees are blooming and the flowers are singing and the birds making honey, and we haven't been fishing yet. Well there's only one more month till July, and then we'll go, and no mistake."

When July came, it found a man made broader and bigger by his experiences, a man who sympathized with the under dog, a man who believed that there is innate good in every creature. Porter went direct to Pittsburg, where Margaret was then living with her maternal grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. G. P. Roach. During the nine month of his stay here he wrote such brilliant stories as to attract the attention of Mr. Gilman Hall, the editor of *Ainslee's Magazine*. Mr. Hall promised O. Henry a hundred dollars apiece for twelve stories, a price ridiculously low in comparison with what he received later, and advised him to move to New York. This he decided to do, and here his connection with the South ceased. From various chance remarks which O. Henry made in his stories, one might draw the hasty con-

clusion that he disliked Southern ideas, Southern customs, and Southern people. It is more reasonable to suppose, as has been aptly pointed out, that while he did love the South he could see her weaknesses, and that he delighted in ridiculing them just as Alphonse Daudet delighted in satirizing Southern France by means of his great comic character, Tartarin of Tarascon.

When O. Henry arrived in New York in 1902, despite his contract with Mr. Hall and despite the fact that he had contributed stories to *Munsey's*, *McClure's*, *The Black Cat*, and *The Outlook*, he was a comparatively unknown author. The majority of the manuscripts he sent out were returned to him,—to be hopefully sent away again in the next mail. “The Emancipation of Billy,” for instance, was rejected thirteen times before it “landed.” Meanwhile O. Henry was learning New York and her people in his usual way, at first hand. “When I came to New York,” he is reported as saying, “I spent a great deal of my time knocking around the streets. I did things then I wouldn’t think of doing now. I used to walk at all hours of the day and night along the river fronts, through Hell’s Kitchen, down the Bowery, dropping into all manner of places, and talking with anyone who would hold converse with me.” It is small wonder, then, that he knew New York like a book, and that his stories of New York began to attract the attention of many editors. He was persuaded by Mr. Robert H. Davis to sign a contract to furnish *The New York World* with one story a week for a year. The contract, difficult as it must have been to fulfil, was renewed in 1905, and many of O. Henry’s best stories appeared in the *World*.³ At the same time he was writing stories for the popular magazines.

Cabbages and Kings was published in 1904. It attracted such favorable notice from press and public that henceforth O. Henry found a ready market for his work. He wrote assiduously, and received higher prices for his stories, it is said, than any other American author. The publication in book form of twenty-five tales under the title of *The Four Million*, in 1906, placed O. Henry at the head of American short-story writers so

³ Page, *The Bookman*, October, 1913.

far as popularity with the masses is concerned. Other stories were collected and published under the following titles: *The Trimmed Lamp* and *Heart of the West*, 1907; *The Gentle Grafter* and *The Voice of the City*, 1908; *Options* and *Roads of Destiny*, 1909; and *Strictly Business* and *Whirligigs*, 1910.

In 1908 Porter married Miss Sarah Lindsay Coleman of Asheville, North Carolina. At their New York home, 28 West Twenty-Sixth Street, O. Henry was beginning a new series of short stories and planning a novel, which his admirers fondly hoped would be the long-awaited great American novel, when his hand was stilled by death, June 5, 1910.

Sixes and Sevens was published in 1911; and *Rolling Stones*, the material for which was collected and published by the late Harry Peyton Steger in 1912, is the final volume of O. Henry's complete works. Porter was perhaps unique among authors in that every story he wrote, including several fragmentary and unfinished ones, was published either in magazine or book form or in both.

His death was untimely. But there is little reason for thinking that a longer life would have added to his present and future literary rank.

II.

O. Henry has succeeded above all else in choosing subjects that are interesting.

Cabbages and Kings is a rambling novel-like narrative consisting of a dozen or more stories that centre around the American consuls and residents and the absconding President of Coralio, a Central American republic. The connection between each chapter is so slight that one hardly notices it until he has completed the entire book, and then he is filled with amazement and surprise at the skilful correlation of chapters.

Heart of the West contains various short stories whose setting is the old-time Texas. There are cattle-kings with their queens and royal children who exhibit an almost incredible sense of humor. There is an outlaw who kills his sweetheart in the "caballero's way" and rides off singing. Miserable drunkards arrive in San Antonio by means of brake-beams, and are re-

formed by the cruel-kindness of cowboys. Ranchmen or merchants, after exciting adventures in New York, return to compare that city invidiously with 'San Antone.' There is a serpent-charmer in El Paso who returns on the arm of a gallant Texas Ranger from an unsuccessful search for her lost python and who screams when a tiny caterpillar crosses her path. If in these stories O. Henry has strengthened the Eastern belief that all Texans wear spurred boots and six-shooters and that all Texas women are "cowgirls," he has also shown the Easterners the virtues, the common sense, and the inchoate romanticism of these pioneers.

The Gentle Grafter, the author's poorest book, chronicles the confidence games of Jeff Peters, Andy Turner, and others. The grafters pursue their schemes with equal success in Texas and in New York City: one almost sympathizes with them, for they are not wicked, but only shrewd and very human. The book tires, however, because it is written altogether in slang.

The other books, in the main composed of stories of the "four million" of New York City, are of almost equal merit. There is a girl in gray who narrates to her chance companion her triumphs in the "four hundred," and goes back to work in a nearby restaurant, unaware that he is a scion of New York's swell set. Or the situation is reversed: A laboring man in evening clothes gallantly rescues a plainly dressed girl from a street-jam; they dine together, and the girl departs for her brownstone palace, while the pseudo-clubman repairs to his shabby boarding-house. Or there are "transients in Arcadia," a laborer and a shop-girl who enjoy one week of high life at a fashionable hotel, neither cognizant of the other's deception until it is time to leave.

Again, a shop-girl will vainly use her darts to pierce the heart of some millionaire customer, while her roommate irons in a laundry and is content with a ninety-dollar-a-month beau; the laundry queen catches the millionaire, and the shop-girl becomes disgusted with the *nouveau riche* and marries the discarded beau. But there is a graver view. Dulcie also works in a department-store for five dollars a week. Her starved soul craves pleasure, and she accepts an invitation to dine with the odious 'Piggy,'—

an unfinished story, O. Henry called it. A young tenement-owner *en route* for Coney Island responds to the coquettish smiles of a lovely girl, and is horrified to learn that she, as well as many others, has picked up such arts because his tenements afford no place for them to entertain respectably. Seriousness, however, is not our author's vein. He prefers to tell of the flat-dweller who invariably plays pool at night, leaving his wife alone; and who one evening finds a note saying that she has been called away by her mother's illness. He is lonely, and he vows that he will never leave Katy alone again. Suddenly the door opens, and his wife walks in. The man automatically reaches for his hat and goes out to play pool with the boys. Perhaps a hungry tramp, Soapy, plans to get "pinched" for the sake of comfortable quarters in jail. He steals an umbrella, breaks a show-window, and accosts an unescorted girl, but the police strangely ignore him. In disgust, Soapy sinks on a bench. Across the way come strains of inspiring music, and the tramp's mind fills with a sudden desire to reform, to go to work. And—a heavy hand is laid on his shoulder, and a cop sends him to "the island" for vagrancy. There is a tawdry vaudeville star whose act consisted in swinging on a wire far out above the heads of the audience and in kicking off one of her yellow silk garters. She retires to a village and is proposed to by a pious clergyman. When pressed, he admits that he has had one previous, ignoble love-affair; he even brings out a memento of it, a yellow silk garter, and the shamed woman flies back to vaudeville. Or O. Henry will ridicule the ubiquitous Sherlock Holmes by means of his detective, Shamrock Jolnes. Though Shamrock is sometimes baffled so that he calls on the more famous Juggins to aid him, his own deductive powers are so acute that one glance enables him to tell that a certain man on a street-car has come from Virginia accompanied by two daughters and an adopted daughter.

In the dozen volumes of short stories O. Henry has not a single dull or dragging subject. To this modern Caliph Haroun-al-Raschid the most trivial incident in the life of the proletarian is teeming with romance, and touched by his facile pen it becomes a story of at least passing interest to every reader.

Few of his subjects, however, are in themselves great, and few will remain long in one's memory.

All critics, so far as I know, class O. Henry's stories as hyphenated, capitalized "Short-Stories"; but if they hold to the hide-bound *a priori* rules which require a short-story to fulfil the three classic unities, to deal with one character only, and to show rigid compression and condensation of details, they are hoist with their own petard. For O. Henry gleefully breaks every rule and heartily enjoys the critics' discomfiture. The only thing that may be confidently postulated of his stories is that they usually produce a single effect on the mind of the reader. This alone, it would seem, is enough to make a short story a "short-story": most certainly it was the ideal that Poe had in mind. O. Henry recognized no rigid, unalterable laws of structure: the story was the thing, and there was a best method of telling each story. Indeed he declared: "Rule 1 of story-writing is to write stories that please yourself. There is no rule 2. In writing, forget the public. I get a story thoroughly in mind before I sit down at my table. Then I write it out quickly, and without revising it, send it to my publishers. In this way I am able to judge my work almost as the public judges it. I've seen stories in type that I didn't at first blush recognize as my own."

The elucidation was unnecessary, for his stories plainly evince such workmanship. That O. Henry was a technical artist, few will deny: even his mannerisms, such as his interpolative comments on plot-structure and his pseudo-moralizing divagations, cannot debar his narratives from the short-story class. Nevertheless, it is to be regretted that he took so many liberties, for his mannerisms may soon cease to amuse, and they are likely to lower his rank in literature. When Mr. Kipling was experimenting in authorship, he too delighted in radically original structure and in bold departures from the conventional. Matured powers showed him that there was little permanency in whimsicalness, and that his originality could be used to more advantage in style, in characterization, and in plots than in risking to offend his readers by such warping of structure.

O. Henry never learned this lesson. It was quite usual for

him to ramble carelessly afield, making sundry vague remarks about the attitude of the Columbia College professors towards grammar and the plagiarism he is contemplating, and then to lament that, in thus sparring for an opening, he has forgotten to follow Aristotle's directions! Or to open a story with the casual remark that "It was a day in March," and to advise: "Never, never begin a story this way when you write one. No opening could possibly be worse. It is unimaginative, flat, dry and likely to consist of mere wind." In later stories, such as "The Unprofitable Servant," he makes no 'bones' of confessing that he wrote thus in order "to swell the number of words" for which he was paid. Indisputably this is attractive, though one feels that it is unwarranted, that the author has taken an undue advantage to secure humor. The truth is O. Henry failed to take himself and his art seriously. He strove only to arrest the momentary attention of the rapidly moving mass of readers. And in his stories the first sentence, which is customarily some such remark as "No, bumptious reader, this is not a continuation of the Elsie series," invariably does this. Furthermore, since the preconceived effect that his stories attempt to produce is usually one of surprise or humor, his introductions always aid in producing this effect.

There is little skirmishing in the body of his stories: it progresses rapidly, and shows a rigid economy of words. O. Henry's mania for suppression of detail comes nearer to equalling that of "Guy de Mopassong" (as he calls him) and of other French writers than does that of any other American writer, not excepting Poe. He had a distinct aim, and he wrote every word with this aim in view. His stories are customarily short: not many run over three thousand words, and the majority contain about two thousand. In a story called "Tommy's Burglar" he satirizes the two-thousand-word story. "The burglar got into the house without much difficulty," he wrote; "because we must have action and not too much description in a two-thousand-word story." And finally the burglar says to Tommy: "Now hurry and let me out, kid. Our two thousand words must be nearly up."

Yet, paradoxical as it may seem, nearly every one of his

stories contains one or more digressions, which always seem necessary, and which remind one forcibly of Thackeray. He may never have read the English novelist, but he reproves the gentle reader's foibles in a Thackerayesque manner by saying, for instance: "You remember the stories you memorize and the card tricks you study and that little piece on the piano—how does it go?—ti-tum-te-tum-ti-tum—those little Arabian Ten-Minute Entertainments that you furnish when you go up to call on your rich Aunt Jane." Clever as this moralizing is, it is irrelevant; but as I have always enjoyed Thackeray's digressions as much as his stories, so these appeal to me. They add the humor for which O. Henry always sought.

His conclusions—they are O. Henry's and no one else's. Children play "crack-the-whip," not for the fun of the long preliminary run, but for the excitement of the final sharp twist that throws them off their feet. So adults read O. Henry, impatiently glancing at the swiftly moving details in pleased expectancy of a surprising ending. The conclusion is an enigma: the author has your nerves all a-quiver until the last sentence. There are few explanations, the surprise comes quickly, and the story is finished. O. Henry is as much a master of the unexpected ending as Frank Stockton was of the insolvable ending, and one must admire his skill. For although these endings are unexpected, the author never makes any statement in the body that can be held against him. On the contrary, the body is a careful preparation for the dénouement, even if the most searching reader can seldom detect it. This is true even of the very poor story "Girl," in which O. Henry deliberately entraps the reader into believing that Hartley is imploring Vivienne to become his wife, when in reality, as we discover at the end of the story, he is imploring her to become his wife's cook. A few more stories like "Girl" would have ruined O. Henry's reputation. In "Thimble, Thimble" and several other stories he has adopted the conclusion made famous by "The Lady or the Tiger?" In all the others, the unexpected dénouement occurs, and in many of them are two distinct surprises that will shock the most phlegmatic reader to laughter. The most popular of the double-surprise stories is "The Gift of the Magi." But the

continued use of the unexpected ending grows tiresome, and when one sits down and reads all or the greater part of the two hundred and forty-eight short stories, he feels that the biggest surprise O. Henry could have given him would have been a natural, expected ending. But it should be added that his surprise endings have none of the brutal cynicism which distinguishes de Maupassant's "Necklace" and Mérimée's "Mateo Falcone"; his endings, on the other hand, are genuinely humorous, genuinely sympathetic, and genuinely human.

For the sake of vividness the majority of the short stories are told in the first person. Either a character who participated in the action is the narrator; or an outsider tells the story as a participant told it to him; or the story is told apparently in the third person until the author intrudes with his own comments and makes it a first-person narrative. At other times the strict third-person narrative is used; but in whatever way the stories are told, O. Henry is always talking, always explaining his views.

Stages of plot as definite as those in the Shakesperean drama may be located in most of his stories, and they are well adapted for dramatization, as the recent success of *Alias Jimmy Valentine*, *A Double-Dyed Deceiver*, and others show. This goes to prove that even though O. Henry pokes fun at all rules, he obeys them in the fundamental particulars. He is a clever architectonist in spite of himself. While he prided himself upon his disregard of conventional rules and upon his originality, his technique (if one ignores his manneristic digressions) conforms closely to the very rules that he affected to despise.

His individuality and his unconventionality are shown also in his remarks concerning setting: "People say I know New York well. Just change Twenty-Third Street in one of my New York stories to Main Street, rub out the Flat-iron Building and put in the Town Hall. Then the story will fit just as truly elsewhere. At least I hope this is the case with what I write. So long as your story is true to life, the mere change of local color will set it in the East, West, South, or North. The characters in the 'Arabian Nights' parade up and down Broadway at midday, or Main Street in Dallas, Texas." Flaubert

would have torn his hair at this statement, though like all exaggerations it contains some truth.

It is true that O. Henry's New York stories have little dependence upon the setting. Their interest lies chiefly in plot and in character. Nevertheless, the reader is apt to feel that such incidents and such people are to be met with only in New York, while the scene of each story is definitely in his mind. Not by long and formal description, but by a touch here, a touch there, the scene is presented. *Cabbages and Kings*, however, is a series of stories in which the setting is important. The people, the environment, the incidents themselves are representative only of Spanish-American provinces, and a violent change in realism would follow any attempt at transplanting them. *Heart of the West*, too, has as much local color as can be obtained in stories of ranch life, although there are many who would claim that O. Henry did not portray Texas truly. But *The Gentle Grafters* has no real local color, for it tells of the operations of the shysters in Texas, Arkansas, New Jersey, New York, and elsewhere,—stories that are applicable to any time or any place, and whose interest lies solely in the plot.

O. Henry evades Mr. Brander Matthews's *a priori* law of unity of characterization by giving almost every story at least two characters of equal importance, but the law will remain intact if the reader choose for himself one major character and consider the others subordinate. The author portrays, in the main, the common people, since he rightly believed that "the four million" are more representative than "the four hundred" of whom contemporary novelists tell us. Into every nook and corner of their lives he takes us, showing us the capitalist, the broker, the underpaid clerk, the underpaid shop-girl, the dweller in flat and tenement, the actor, the 'con' man, the masher, and the rest. His portraits are convincing and realistic, but the characters themselves lack individuality. One feels that O. Henry regarded them as mere types of life, that each acts as the other 3,999,999 would if placed in similar situations, and that he was more interested in life in general than in the study of individualized characters. Out of his attitude to life he formulated this philosophy: "My purpose is to show that in every human heart

there is an innate tendency towards a respectable life ; that even those who have fallen to the lowest depths in the social scale would, if they could, get back to the higher life ; that the innate propensity of human nature is to choose the good instead of the bad."

Life is a mixture of smiles and sniffles and sobs, with the sniffles predominating, declared O. Henry in "The Gift of the Magi." The petty joys, the petty pretensions, the petty worries of his people confirm the statement ; but he also has the idea that life is one constant surprise, that the unexpected continually happens. He is, then, a pure romanticist who strives earnestly for realistic effects. Furthermore, he is a broad-minded democrat. This trait was noticeable in his early career. Dr. Daniels states that, while O. Henry was editing *The Rolling Stone*, "he was one of the genuine democrats that you hear about more often than you meet. Night after night, after we could shut up the shop, he would call to me to come along and 'go bumming.' . . . We would wander through streets and alleys, meeting with some of the worst specimens of down-and-outers it has ever been my privilege to see at close range. I've seen the most ragged specimen of a bum hold up Porter, who would always do anything he could for the man. . . . He never cared for the so-called higher classes, but watched the people on the streets and in the shops and in the cafés, getting his ideas from them night after night."

Naturally such a man would say : "We often hear 'shop-girls' spoken of. No such persons exist. There are girls who work in shops. They make their living that way. But why turn their occupation into an adjective?" He shows that the shop-girl is human, that she is not all pompadour and chewing gum. He chronicles the meagre, dreary facts of her existence, but he neither patronizes, ridicules, nor preaches. In the powerful "Unfinished Story," which, by the way, has been honored by a recent second printing in *McClure's Magazine*, he quietly shows the public the cruelty and danger of her social life. For O. Henry remarked on another occasion that "it is not the salesgirl *in* the department store who is worth studying, it is the salesgirl *out* of it. You can't get romance over a counter."

Likewise he condemns the city's pitfalls for innocence, showing that parents, because of indifference, are to blame for their children's missteps; or the wealthy landlord, who provides no parlors for his ill-smelling tenements, thus forcing young girls to entertain in the streets; or the vile pandar, the most depraved of beasts, who preys on half-paid, starving women.

In shams he sees only humor. Shop-girls and workingmen may masquerade as great ladies and great gentlemen and derive pleasure from it, he thinks, without injuring anyone. He understands, too, the code of ethics of the lower classes, and makes us understand it. If the gentle grafter can open his oyster-world, not with a sword but with "a Chilian diamond engagement ring, a wedding ring, a potato masher, a bottle of soothing syrup, and *Dorothy Vernon*—all for fifty cents," well and good. For the world is not a philanthropic institution. It is a place where the fittest survive, and where the silly goose is picked. The dregs of humanity are treated with a sympathy that pierces to the core of the trouble and sees its solution. And if we accept O. Henry's point of view, never again will we scoff at the flimsy pleasures of the poor: we will try to give them more pleasures.

We see motion pictures of these people. A glimpse, and the fate-driven actors are gone on their unchanging way, not suspecting how near by the wings of romance have swept. They are described by their actions, or by brief, trenchant sentences that are hurled at our heads, as "He wore heliotrope socks, but he looked like Napoleon." O. Henry uses rapid suggestive—never detailed circumstantial—description that is highly colored by bold figures of speech. Where many writers would waste three hundred words in a vain attempt to catalogue features so as to put an image of a character in one's mind, O. Henry can in twenty-five words paint a clear, unforgettable picture. No other writer has excelled him in the use of suggestive description. Sometimes his characters are described by their unusual surroundings. But since he seldom assumes complete omniscience, it is rare that he attempts any psychological analysis.

Subjectivity of delineation makes our author's characters interesting chiefly as they reveal his views of life, and interest in

characters is overshadowed by interest in plots. But for briskness, sympathy, and humor of characterization, O. Henry has few peers.

Just as his plots and his characters are humorous in conception and in treatment, so the most striking trait of O. Henry as a stylist is humor. In most instances his fun bubbles out spontaneously, but *The Gentle Grafter* bids somewhat too plainly for laughter. His stories show few pathetic-comic mixtures, for he recognizes no pathos save that of monotony, of degradation, of lost ambition, which is inherent in the lives of people; but they do show mixtures of sentiment and humor that verge on the ridiculous. Some of his means for securing humorous effects have already been noted: other and less satisfactory means used to attain this result are a continual juggling of words, execrable punning, and a superabundance of faulty literary allusions.

Humor lightens even the brief descriptions that are scattered through his stories. There is little more tendency to adjectivity in his descriptions of objects than there is in his descriptions of persons. The force and vividness of his descriptions are due rather to unusual words, to an abundance of verbs that suggest sound and movement, to numerous and striking similes and metaphors. In one brief sentence he pictures a place. Thus "Crow Knob was a post-office and some scenery set at an angle of forty-five degrees and a welkin." Rarely indeed does he write a description that is not redolent of slang.

About O. Henry's diction let me explain in the apt words of one of his characters: "That man had a vocabulary of about 10,000 words and synonyms, which arrayed themselves into contraband sophistries and parables when they came out." His vocabulary, which is really very large, is a servant, not a master. He had absolutely no respect for conventional usage. Words must be coined to express his thought, or the usual meaning of words must be distorted; O. Henry did both without compunction. In addition to this maltreatment of words (and in the mouths of his low characters it becomes mere punning), his vocabulary was stretched by an appalling number of slang words and slang phrases. There can be little doubt that it is the presence of slang that makes O. Henry appeal so strongly to the

general reading public to-day ; for the public is drawn to a writer who scorns academic niceties of speech and strikes out on a new path, untrammelled by convention. There is no doubt, further, that in his unexcelled mastery of slang our author was quite effective. But taste changes and, what is more pertinent, slang itself changes, so that his constant use of slang will some day count heavily against him.

Henry Ward Beecher, who is reported to have said that when the English language got in his way it didn't stand a chance, had a worthy disciple in O. Henry. For the latter not only made a servant of words, but he also made a servant of grammar and rhetoric. It is amusing when he writes a sentence abounding in pronouns, becomes confused, and cries in parentheses, "Confound the English language," but it is also cheap. Like Mr. Kipling he affects the verbless and fragmentary sentence, often with good results ; and his paragraphs often lack ease of movement, composed as they are of intentionally jerky sentences. That O. Henry's piquant audacities of style are attractive is indisputable, but they are certain to lose their piquancy and to lower his rank in literature.

On the other hand, his stories have the absolute harmony of tone so essential to the short-story writer. Harmony is felt even in "Let Me Feel Your Pulse," a short story that opens with broad burlesque and ends in the subtly allegorical. There is, also, a nice proportion, an artistic condensation of details, and a vividness of style that call to mind Poe in America, Mr. Kipling in England, and de Maupassant in France.

Many of his stories are marred by local and contemporaneous allusions that in a few years will be pointless and vague. The joke on Mr. Roosevelt in "The Rose of Dixie" is already flat ; and there are numerous indiscriminate references to Battling Nelson, Pears' soap, Mrs. Winslow's soothing syrup, that cheapen his work. However pleasing such allusions may be when they are penned, they fail to interest succeeding generations. The slanginess of his style, too, is certain to render him distasteful, perhaps unintelligible, to future readers, just as it has already hindered the translation of his stories into foreign languages. Slang is ephemeral. It will make one a writer for

the hour, not a writer for all time. Realizing this, O. Henry had planned a series of new stories. "I want to show the public," he said, "that I can write something new—new for me, I mean—a story without slang, a straightforward dramatic plot treated in a way that will come nearer my ideal of real story-writing." "The Dream," which was to be the first of the new series, was broken off in the middle of a sentence by his death. In its incomplete form it appeared in the September, 1910, *Cosmopolitan*,—a more pathetic "unfinished story" than that of Dulcie.

If necessary, O. Henry's claim to permanence in American literature could be based, like Poe's, on his mastery of the short-story form, for in this respect no other American writer has excelled him. But he has other admirable traits: his frank individuality, his genuine democracy, his whole-souled optimism, his perennial humor, his sympathetic treatment of characteristic American life are irresistible.

For several years O. Henry has been the most popular short-story writer in America, and the "four million" have cried for more stories. It would be absurd to say that the inherent value of his work was not primarily the cause of his popularity, for although slangy mannerisms might attract readers, the latter will not be held if there is not something worth while in the stories themselves; and it seems improbable that the public will soon change from an enthusiastic to a Laodicean temper. To judge O. Henry as if he were a novelist is unfair. He wrote only short stories. He should be judged only by the short-story standard. And although I cannot consider O. Henry great, because of the limitations previously mentioned, yet I do believe that he will always be counted as one of the best American writers of the short story.

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